

EDITORIAL

Fulfilling the Public Service Remit in the Post-Broadcasting Era: Does the Medium Still Matter?

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Despite the ongoing transition from public service broadcasting (PSB) towards public service media (PSM), the traditional values and basic principles of public service in media – especially including services that nurture and facilitate democracy, support and cultivate domestic culture, and ensuring universal access – have been resilient and remarkably persistent. An enduring goal of media policy in Europe has been making sure domestic PSB providers have the required resources to fulfill their remits.

After 20 years of continuing growth in web traffic, and given increasing economic pressures to develop fixed and mobile networks as well as the number and scope of new services, continuation is increasingly tenuous. It is uncertain if public service principles can be maintained in an evolving media environment dominated by network communications. Broadcasting has already lost the normative hegemonic position it enjoyed for decades. An increasing number of governments are reducing funding for PSB and there is a growing pressure to reallocate more spectrum space to mobile industries. At the same time, public broadcasters are intentionally shifting their shrinking resources from broadcasting to online services they hope will appeal to younger audiences who are more interested in “new media” and “social media” as quality content on “old media” platform doesn’t seem to be enough.

It is understandable that PSB providers are worried about the consequences of failing to make the leap to new personalized, mobile and networked media. They should also be worried about challenges and problems they will face in an increasing dependency on non-broadcast platforms. Moving public service operations into the networked domain is not about replacing a previous technology with a new one with the idea of replicating the fit. The medium matters because the concept of public service with its traditional humanistic values and democratic principles have been defined purely in terms of the broadcast domain.

This special issue focuses on the mismatch and potential contradictions between public service values and the affordances of networked and mobile communication. The idea was partly originated in Tokyo in RIPE@2014 conference discourse about crossing borders and boundaries in PSM. A large part of the empirical work, including a six-month research period at the University of Leeds in the UK, was funded by the Academy of Finland in a project about *Broadcasting in the Post-Broadcast Era: Policy, Technology, and Content Production*.

The first article in this special issue, ‘Eroding the Assets of Citizenship ? From Broadcast to Broadband’, was written by Sylvia Harvey from the University of Leeds and Marko Ala-Fossi from the University of Tampere. They analyze competition over spectrum space between European broadcasters and mobile media industries, which has so far peaked at the World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC-15) in November 2015. Although the conference decided that the UHF band below 700 MHz should remain the province of broadcast use at least until 2023, economic and political pressures to reallocate and privatize more public spectrum for mobile telecom use will certainly persist.

Gregory Ferrell Lowe, also from the University of Tampere, and Alan G. Stavitsky from the University of Nevada-Reno in the USA examine what will be needed to ‘Ensuring Public Service News Provision in the Era of Networked Communications’. They focus on the principle of public service values in the industrial context of journalistic news production and argue that a public service orientation in news journalism supports democracy and makes sense from a commercial news perspective. They make a case for legacy news media providers to preserve and reinvent the historic public service ethos in the networked media environment, and for pure players in the online news business to develop a public service code of professional ethics to steer their practices in journalism.

In the third article on ‘Mobile PSM in Australia: Ubiquity and its consequences’, Fiona Martin from the University of Sydney in Australia analyses how two public service broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), are reinterpreting the universality principle as the realization of digital ubiquity on new media platforms. She questions the extent to which these two concepts actually overlap, suggesting the main consequence of intensive presence on non-broadcast platforms is mainly an increased PSM dependency on the development strategies of global giants in mobile and network technology industries.

In ‘Dismantling the Public Airwaves: Shifting Canadian public broadcasting to an online service’, Gregory Taylor from the University of Calgary in Canada studies how the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) has tried to adapt in the new technological and political environment by investing more effort and resources in online and mobile services at the cost of reducing free-to-air terrestrial broadcasting services in both TV and radio. The emphasis on Canadians as consumers rather than citizens, together with cost-cutting measures that are deep and worrisome, has led the CBC to abandon broadcasting for large communities, leaving them without local services, which has damaged the CBC’s ability to meet its remit.

The fifth article on ‘The Short Future of Public Broadcasting: Replacing DTT with IP?’ by Marko Ala-Fossi from the University of Tampere and Stephen Lax from the University of Leeds analyses the degree to which a popular future vision to move all PSM content distribution onto IP-based networks is realistic. The idea of an overarching convergence is not new and has so far not been convincing in practice. This latest version is based on predictions that digital terrestrial television (DTT) will be extinct by 2030. However, PSM has many special political and economic privileges, as well as obligations, which are only compatible with the technological characteristics of broadcasting.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue develop discussion about the viability of public service in the post-broadcast media environment and highlight the consequences of "successful" adaptation. This transition is often framed as a mere technological shift, when in fact it poses fundamental challenges to the public service potential of PSM and threatens its institutional survival. The collection contemplates what stands to be lost if policy makers permit such a drastic weakening in PSM's ability to maintain and promote core public service values in the context of an increasingly mediated social life.